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Before the state of student handwriting can be improved, children and their teachers must be thoroughly educated in sound handwriting skills. If a legible script is taught with sufficient vigor in the first six grades and in junior high school as well, children will be equipped for life with a valuable tool. To fortify these skills in the classroom, teachers should insist upon high standards for all handwritten assignments and motivate students to achieve an efficient, rapid script by rewarding legible work, by keeping files of student handwriting samples to check progress, and by providing students with numerous good examples in their own chalkboard work or handwritten comments. However, because superb instruction in handwriting skills cannot be demanded of ill-equipped teachers, both preservice and inservice teacher education should be supplemented with the best of new ideas in handwriting manuals, texts, practice cards, and other visual aids. (JB)

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We prefer manuscripts that do not exceed 2,500 words, although we can use shorter pieces of 100 to 600 words. Write what you have to say in as few words as possible, eliminating trite phrases and unnecessary words.

Typing should be double spaced. Keep the carbon copy and send us the original. To tailor articles to available space, we may have to make slight changes in the manuscript.

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Send manuscripts to the Editor, THE CLEARING HOUSE, Fairligh Dickinson University, Teaneck, New Jersey.

HANDWRITING:
The Neglect of a Needed Skill

By E. A. ENSTROM

"IF YOU REALLY WANT to know why so much handwriting in high schools is illegible," a superintendent of schools at a recent AASA convention suggested, "go through your classrooms after dismissal and take pictures of chalkboard scribbling by teachers. There is your answer!"

I couldn't completely refute his argument, since I was fully aware of how children of all ages seek to imitate the excellent or atrocious script of a favorite teacher. This is the power of incidental teaching. While it will not teach efficient handwriting as such, it certainly has great influence and, if creditable, does much to maintain the skill that has been developed at previous learning levels.

Still, I couldn't help turning over in my mind a few additional basic reasons for failure and frustration with handwriting in higher schools. Reasons that I knew to exist and that must receive firm attention if we are ever to win the battle of obtaining rapidly written and easily read script beyond the elementary level. A review of these essentials could be useful.

Strong Initial Teaching

There can be no "carry-over" in either elementary or higher levels unless something has been taught initially that results in a legible script capable of being "carried over." If no skill has been developed, no skill exists to be efficiently used at *any* level. Demanding something from pupils who are unable to perform the task merely creates frustrations.

The first six grades must teach efficient handwriting in order to add efficiency to their own day-long writing needs. This means efficient, rapid skill so that valuable school time will be saved in the writing process. It means, too, easily read script so that the reader's valuable time will be saved. This is an elemental basic requirement if we are to quiet the cry that "poor handwriting is the greatest time-thief in schools today."

But this is never enough; alone it is a short-sighted "present needs" view of the educational picture. Since handwriting is (perhaps foolishly) not taught beyond the sixth grade in most schools, there must be overlearning to carry the individual through additional years of schooling and then meet his occupational needs. Handwriting must be taught with sufficient vigor to equip the person with an efficient life tool. Since quality always drops with cessation of practice in all similar motor skills, some speak strongly in favor of further extending instruction in handwriting through the junior high school and "for all those who require it in the senior high school." (1,2,3)

EDITOR'S NOTE

Some years ago (October, 1961, to be exact) CH published an article by the author which lamented the sad state of pupils' handwriting. Apparently the intervening time has produced little positive action, and a strong reminder might be in order. Dr. Enstrom is Director of Research and Instruction with Peterson Directed Handwriting in Greensburg, Pennsylvania.

In many elementary schools this need for teaching more efficient handwriting skill is crucial. In many areas handwriting is the poorest-taught branch of the curriculum. As was done in Philadelphia, it would be helpful if high schools everywhere pressured the elementary department to do something constructive about helping solve the handwriting problem. (4) Outside pressure often awakens inside personnel—as was the case with reading instruction a few years back.

Teacher Training

This could wisely include a few basic instructions in chalkboard writing for high school teachers, too, because of the power of the aforementioned and ever-present incidental learning, be it good or bad.

Colleges must definitely train elementary teachers or no solution to the serious problem is in sight. Many colleges are belatedly establishing such programs in conjunction with language arts and methods courses and are calling for help from consultants of commercial houses. This is a good beginning.

However, our vast pool of teachers who now teach and who were cheated out of training need help too. New color-description texts, cards, and visual aids will help. (5) In-service sessions will speed the recovery. (6) Institutes and educational conventions could wisely schedule sessions on improved instruction in handwriting.

In any event, it should be abundantly clear at this late hour that improved learning comes from improved teaching, and that this is the egg that must come first if we are to be rewarded with legible script. This improved teaching should include teachers' preparing for the higher schools so that they will not be guilty of tearing down that which is painstakingly constructed in the lower levels. Teachers beyond the elementary program also have responsibilities to every phase of communications. (7)

Holding High Standards

In addition to an improved personal script, it would be most helpful if teachers at all levels would set high standards of acceptability for all handwritten assignments. Keeping on file a sample of each pupil's best handwriting could be most useful here. Every pupil's best should be the absolute minimum if habits of legible handwriting are to be established and maintained.

It is too easy for teachers to fall into the trap of accepting work that borders on trash. This is not good teaching. No teacher does a child a good turn by permitting him to develop gross carelessness. Such carelessness in handwriting often produces careless answers in content also, and so can not be justified or defended from any standpoint. (8)

Motivation

If I were a pupil who always handed in carefully prepared assignments and no one ever noticed it, I would be tempted to hand in a "scribbled mess" just to attract a little attention!

It takes teacher effort to motivate, but such motivation saves hours in correcting time. Try double grading papers—one grade for content, one for handwriting. Incidentally, five extra points for easily read papers does wonders for carry-over. By the same token, five points off for time-consuming handwriting also spurs the lower end of the scale.

Such phrases as "Neat writing," "Nicely written," or "Better" placed by the teacher at the top of paper to be returned to pupils more than pay for the time used in their writing. I never feel sorry for teachers who waste literally hours of time in correcting papers when they have been foolish enough to accept sloppy work from talented pupils. A little effort in the direction of motivation could eliminate many reading problems and save hours of correcting time.

Summary

Before recovery from atrocious handwriting can occur, certain things must take place. Children must *know* how to write or good handwriting cannot be expected of them. Demanding quality work from the incapable merely frustrates and causes unhappiness.

Before pupil preparation can take place, there must be sound teacher preparation. If it is ridiculous to demand from a child that which he is incapable of doing, it is equally ridiculous to demand superb instruction from ill-equipped teachers. Therefore there must be an upgrading of instruction for those college students who intend to teach and for those in service now who, through no fault of their own, were cheated out of this teaching skill. Both preliminary and in-service training should be supplemented with the best of new ideas by way of manuals, texts, practice cards, and other visual aids.

High standards of acceptability should be enforced by every teacher who requires handwritten work. Communication has been called the bridge to learning. Handwriting is an important span in that bridge, and maintenance is strictly a responsibility of every teacher.

Motivation for better work is positive psychology used by wise teachers who recognize the correcting time saved by the easily read script obtained in this manner.

Finally, there is nothing quite so forceful as "practicing what you preach." The example placed by teachers on chalkboards should serve to strengthen rather than tear down. Many administrators are voicing serious concern with both poor attitudes and atrocious handwriting by high school teachers. Teachers, your chalkboard example is your "handwriting on the wall"!

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The love of adventure inherent in all men can be used to advantage in education by finding an outlet in creative thought which increases the understanding of the dignity of man.

The supreme end of education is to understand the dignity and worth of man by developing in life a shining splendor of reverence for the spirit of the known.—JAMES VAN PATTEN in *School and Community,* Vol. 51:9.